

PLACEBO, *pluh SEE boh*, is a substance that physicians sometimes use as a medicine, even though it contains no active ingredient. A placebo brings about an improvement or even a cure in some patients. Placebos look like real drugs, but most consist only of sugar or a salt solution. Doctors in the United States rarely use placebos for therapy. European physicians generally use them as they would any drug, with a positive effect in about 30 per cent of the patients.

Doctors believe the effectiveness of placebos depends on the patient's belief that the substance being administered is actually medicine. In many cases, this belief provides a psychological boost that can improve the patient's condition. The relationship between the patient and the physician also can influence the placebo's effectiveness. For example, most patients generally believe a trusted doctor who indicates that a pill or injection will relieve pain.

Placebos are also used in research to help determine the effectiveness of new drugs. One group of patients is given a new drug, and a *control* group with the same illness receives a placebo. Researchers then determine what changes occur among only the patients who get the new drug.

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